

IN THE MATTER OF THE
TRUTH-TELLING & HEALING
INQUIRY

Submission of Florence Watson



I, Florence Sylvia Watson (nee Choikee), Ghunghanghi and Kuku Yalanji woman, say as follows:

1. My name is Florence Sylvia Watson, but everyone calls me Flo.
2. I was born on 3 March 1952 at Yarrabah on Ghunghanghi country in North Queensland, and I stayed there until I was taken away when I had just turned 12 years old (I talk about that later in my submission).
3. I am a Ghunghanghi woman from Yarrabah through my dad, but I also have connections to the Kuku Yalanji people from Laura and Maytown through my mum. My connection to country is very real, it's knowing where we come from, our origins, where our roots are.
4. My Aboriginal name is Jinnadirran. I was given my traditional name from my Dad's dad, my Grandfather Ned Choikee. It means granddaughter. I now have a lot of Jinnadirrans too, and those that are named Florence after me are also my Jinnadirrans. Choikee was really Tjoike, but the missionaries anglicised it into Choikee.
5. My totem is the white cockatoo, we call it *guru guru* ^{guru guru} ~~geeroe geeloe~~. I get that totem through my dad and the Ghunghanghi people.

6. My Mum was Doris Maytown Choikee, well that's what they called her, her country was in Cape York, the Kuku Yalanji people. She was part of the stolen generation.
7. My Dad was Gregory Choikee. He was a traditional owner from Yarrabah, a Ghunghanghi man. His Aboriginal name was Wirija. Dad died at an early age. He was a very traditional man. He had a big family.

My Mother and grandmother

8. My mother and her siblings were part of the stolen generation. They were from Cape York, the Kuku Yalanji people. My grandmother's name was Mary, my older cousin told me that. Mum told me that her father was a white man.
9. Mum told me she was taken in the 1930s to Yarrabah. Yarrabah is an Aboriginal community south of Cairns off Green Island.
10. Mum was very strict, and very religious, she was a beautiful looking woman, beautiful voice, she could sing too. She was also a great seamstress, and good at knitting and crocheting. When people got married, she'd make all the dresses.
11. Mum was part of a massacre that happened on the Palmer River, that's what our family and those that were there knew it as, as well as Cannibal Creek. People were shot, killed and eaten. You wonder why, was it because we were black? There were lots of massacres around Australia at that time.
12. Mum told me that when it happened her and the other kids were playing, laughing on the Aboriginal camp on the Palmer River, because they lived around there. It was the gold rush time. She told me the troopers came in and scattered them while they were playing and shot quite a few of them. Mum watched her mother be killed. Mum was shot too on her right leg, and she limped all her life after that. She told me she was trying to save her younger brother, who was just a baby, and she ran over to try and protect him while her mother (my grandmother) was shot and killed. Her baby brother was shot and killed too. Mum's sister, Auntie Rose Maytown, was playing in the trees and that's when the troops went over and gunbuted her. She suffered horrific wounds causing almost blindness, she was disfigured as she was hit so hard.
13. Mum said that the troopers tied her and her siblings up. Those that were removed went to this place called Maytown which was like a big holding cell for people of the stolen generation. Mum told me there were heaps of them there. They then walked them in chains from Maytown to Cooktown, no shoes, and put them on a mission boat to Cairns. Mum's brothers and sisters were sent throughout many reserves across Queensland, they were all separated that day, apart from Auntie Jane Maytown who I mention below.
14. I was looking at all the paperwork from families and personal histories, there were quite a few brothers and sisters that mum had. Mum's sister, Auntie Rose, was taken to Mona Mona

mission near Kuranda, her brother [REDACTED] was taken to New Zealand, Uncle [REDACTED] was taken to Palm Island, Uncle [REDACTED] was taken to Hopevale, Auntie [REDACTED] was sent to Mossman or around that area, and Auntie [REDACTED] was sent to Yarrabah too, but she was older so she was taken there before Mum was and was already there when Mum arrived. It was slavery, that's what happened on those missions. We are still finding Mum's family today.

Mum's life in Yarrabah and the Dormitory

15. After being taken from her country on the Palmer River, Mum was taken to Yarrabah. She didn't know her age, but she told me that she thought she was about four or five years old then. When they arrived there, they didn't know their names or age, so the missionaries gave them names. They called Mum, Doris Maytown.
16. Mum told me they were then taken straight into the dormitory, given one blanket and that's where Mum stayed until she was of a marriageable age. When I got older, I wanted to find my mum's real name. I found out it was Sira, Mum told me that one day in the middle of a conversation, we were just sitting around, but the records just have Maytown.
17. My Auntie Roslyn Choikee, who married my dad's brother, was already on the mission when Mum arrived. She was taken from around Cloncurry, that's what she told me. She also always spoke about when Mum arrived. She said she remembers Mum and the others turning up with no shoes and hardly any clothes. She remembered Mum was wearing a white petticoat. They had to go straight to the dormitory and nowhere else.
18. Mum said that dormitory life was unbelievable. She told me so many stories about it. I remember her telling me that just to get out, for example to see a dentist or doctor, her and her friends from the dormitory used to pour syrup down their mouth to make their teeth rot, just to be able to get out for a little while. You had to get up at the crack of dawn. If you didn't get up, you would get a bashing. I'm not sure what they drank, but they got tea for rations. It was terrible times, but Mum said they put up with it. They were all good friends, they were called the dormitory girls, and they were great singers and they used to do all those dances. I remember seeing these when I was a kid too. She said there was also lots of arguments and fights, but they all looked after each other.
19. The dormitories were also all fenced in. Mum said they slept on mattresses on the floor. There were a lot of girls at the dormitory. Mum said while they lived in the dormitory, they were only allowed to have syrup and damper, only one piece, one meal a day, you couldn't have anything else.
20. Mum told me that they also had to do lots of chores and had to be in bed by a certain time, and if you dared buck the system you would get bashed. There were also lots of rapes in the dormitory and the mission, lots of girls got pregnant that way.

21. When the girls got their periods, Mum told me that they were also made to go away under a tree, and they had to just sit there and wait, stay there for five or six days, they couldn't go anywhere until it had stopped. Mum told me that she had to do this.
22. Mum stayed at Yarrabah her whole life, apart from coming and visiting me a few times to help with the kids. She never went back to her country. She never wanted to go back to her country after everything that had happened to her and her family. It was only later in life that Mum started talking about that night and her life at Yarrabah, but she still didn't tell us everything. She said that there would be some things she would never tell us. This made our relationship hard at times, hard to connect.
23. I remember one afternoon we were coming home from school, no shoes, coming up the road laughing. When we got home there was me and two girls, we were laughing and Mum belted us. We wondered what we were getting hit for. She said, "Stop bloody laughing". She later told me that on the day they were taken away, she was laughing and having fun on Palmer River; they loved doing that, and then, all of a sudden, they were taken away. I guess those sorts of things they all come back to you, and because of that she never went back to her country.

My mum and dad

24. When Mum was of a marriageable age, which was about 21, she was introduced to my Dad. They didn't know each other before that time but Dad told me that he'd had his eye on Mum and a few of the other girls before that day. It wasn't a matter that you were proposed to. Mum told me that they had to line up dressed with potato sacks on them, the brown hessian things, and they had no shoes. Then the missionaries said that you will marry this fellow, and so that's it. Once they were married, they left the dormitory and stayed in the mission itself. Mum didn't know her age, but she said my Dad sort of knew his age, so Mum just said she was born on the same day, same age as Dad.
25. Mum's family, who weren't from there, were called historical people, but Dad's family were traditional as they were from Yarrabah, it was their country.
26. After Mum left the dormitory to marry Dad, her and Dad lived in a little shed on the camp. They built it out of old timber. Mum said it was an old, dilapidated place that Dad and his brothers built. I remember that house when I was little, I stayed there.
27. Mum and Dad had nine kids, but they lost seven of my brothers and sisters over the years to things like whooping cough and other very curable diseases. It was really hard for Mum then. There were no doctors or nurses, they were by themselves.
28. One day, my dad was working up at a local sawmill and he just fell over. They put him in jail; they thought he was just lazy so they punished him for falling. He wasn't lazy; he was a hardworking man. There were no phones in those days, no communications. They brought him back to the camp and Mum went berserk, she knew he was sick. They then first took

him to the place on the mission where they had some medical assistance. I remember the day they took him into Cairns on the boat to go to Brisbane for medical treatment. He was sick, but they still brought him down on the train handcuffed, that's what Mum said. Dad ended up passing away in Cairns I think, but they didn't even tell us. We all of a sudden got word that they were bringing his body back in the coffin on the boat, that's the only way we knew. We ran to the beach, I remember that day well. I remember Granny was wailing. The funeral was huge as he was a traditional man. After Dad had passed we then found out he had cancer, it was a brain tumour that he died from. The white people there, they were all just so cruel, how they treated us, they flogged him as they thought he was lazy. Dad died on 5 September 1959. I was only seven years old then.

29. Below are **photos** of my mum and dad.



My Dad and his family

30. Dad and his family were all on Yarrabah at the mission too, it was his country there.
31. Dad was a very traditional man. He was such a gentle, peaceful, lovely man. He was very clever, a great mathematician. When we did the rations at Yarrabah, he was the one that measured how much went into those ration bags. I remember he always had a lead pencil behind his ear, and he would take it out when he needed to write things down. A bit of sugar for a family of three, or a bit more for a family of five. I remember it well, him doing all that stuff. Next to where the rations were handed out was the store, and I remember it had bars on all the windows. Even though he worked at the ration shed, from what I saw and understood he was still considered an 'inmate' under the Act. I have been shown in more recent times some photos that Tindale had recorded of Aboriginal people that were taken from the front and to the sides, like a mug shot, they were prisoners. He worked very hard for so little pay.
32. Dad's mother was Ada Underwood, we called her Granny Ada. She was part of the stolen generation. I'm not sure how old she was, but she told me she was taken from Magnetic Island, and sent to Lizard Island, and then to Cooktown, and eventually then sent to Yarrabah. She was one of those lovely grannies, but she was strict. Her mother was Emily Underwood. They were Wulgurukaba women, it means canoe people, so I have affiliations there too.
33. I remember she would tell me stories of when they lived on Magnetic Island. There was no water there so they would have to get into canoes and go to the mainland to get it and take it back to Magnetic Island.
34. Granny Ada also told me that when her and her mother Emily, and the man she was with, went over to the mainland one day, the white police were there using the Aboriginal kids as shooting practice targets. They crept and hid in the bush and when the police had a smoke, Granny Emily and the man she was with quickly grabbed one of the kids, saved him and took him back with them. She remembered that day the white men called that little boy tar bucket. Granny Emily adopted him traditionally, and he became an Underwood. I remember him, they always told that story to us.
35. Granny Ada met my grandfather, Ned Tjoiki (Cholkee), at Yarrabah. He was a traditional owner from there. He was the son of Merumanai, named by Gribble as the 'King of Yarrabah'. Toomboo means grandfather in our language.
36. Below is a **photo** that I found when I went through my family and personal history documents, it is a photo of my great grandfather through Dad, Men Muny, he was the Chief of the Ghunghanghi Nation and we were all descendants of him.



37. Granny Ada was a mid-wife. She delivered the first white baby at Yarrabah. There was a big commotion apparently, it was the first white baby being delivered by a black woman.

My childhood at Yarrabah

38. I was born on the mission at Yarrabah and spent my early years there until I was taken away at about 12 years old. I lived in the camp with my Mum, and my Dad (until he passed away), not the dormitories. We only went to the dormitories when we were sick which I mention later in my submission.
39. Even though Mum was a hard and strict woman, tough love, she would still cry all the time too. I think she was like this because of what she experienced, what she had gone through. I remember she always wanted us to be clean and speak well. Mum told me that she was scared we'd be taken away like she was.
40. Below is a **photo** of me with my Mum in our yard at Yarrabah, I was only little then.



41. Dad and his brothers built our house, which was also controlled. I remember it sort of had one big room with a veranda all around, and at the back was the kitchen with the wooden stove, and then the toilet was out the back. Our shower was with a hose, and if we wanted hot water we had to boil it. We would boil our water on a big copper boiler, we'd put it on the fire outside. There were also lots of showers with cane toads, I remember them well, pretty bad. We lived up at the top of the swamp area on the mission. We all slept together on the floor on mattresses. I don't remember there being beds in that house. We didn't have beds until our next house. At the front, the verandah was all dirt, but where we slept on the floor inside was boards.
42. My Granny's house was a big house too, it was right near the beach, right where the new church is now in Yarrabah. Next to the Church now is the park, and when they have ceremonies there now, they always acknowledge my grandmother's house. All the grandchildren would visit Granny and stay there with her, and we'd communicate with mirrors to tell her we were coming down, there were no phones then. We stayed with her a lot, not permanently, but we'd visit and sometimes for days. When there were weddings or ceremonies she'd have it at her house as well.
43. They were only old, dilapidated houses but they were ours. We didn't have any warm water, we had cold baths with cane toads, we had no electricity, only wood stoves. We didn't have washing machines, we had a big pot, fire under it, and we'd boil it up.
44. One night I woke up to a carpet snake wrapped around me, I was only about 3 or 4yrs old. I don't remember the night clearly, but people have told me about it, and we still talk about it

today. I was screaming. My cousin grabbed me, took me up to some of the elders with the snake still wrapped around me. My cousin used to get permission to come and stay with us on the mission. He lived at Mona Mona mission. His mother was Mum's sister, and they would come and see Mum as often as they could. But they had to get permission, a permit to leave Mona Mona mission, and a permit from Yarrabah to enter.

45. I can remember the conditions on the mission. The Superintendent controlled the care and custody of children completely then; they made you go off for work; you had to marry who they told you to; and you couldn't speak language.
46. In those days they just threw different nations all together with many different dialects. It was hard to try and adapt and learn English. We were treated like inmates, that's what it felt like to me. They took photos from the front and sides; I've seen photos in our records, we were treated like you were in prison. If you dared to buck the system you were taken away and put into other communities.
47. On Yarrabah, like all missions, there was segregation. Where the whites lived there were picket fences separating people. Where the dormitory was that's where the white people lived, for example the teachers and storekeepers. We weren't allowed over there unless you were asked to come or were working as a domestic for one of the white families.
48. A lot of the women like my Mum were domestics and helped look after the white kids. Dad worked at the ration shed. I remember seeing their little bank books, they were little grey things. From what I understand from Mum and Dad, and others, Mum and Dad didn't receive all their wages in those days, for the work they did their payments were taken off them, and they would only receive a few pennies here and there. In 2006 I received a letter from the Queensland Government apologising in the spirit of reconciliation for any distress, personal hurt or humiliation caused because of the control of wages or savings under the "Protection Acts". That letter was mostly for the wages that were taken from my parents. I remember when I received that letter, it felt good getting that. Annexed as **FSW-1** to my submission is a copy of that letter.
49. There was a huge swamp in the middle of the mission at Yarrabah, one side was what we called 'top row', and the other side was 'bottom row'. Aboriginal families lived on both sides in camps, we lived on the top. The white areas where the dormitories were, as well as the old hospital, they were right up the top, above top row near the mountain. My Granny's house, and others, they lived down the other end, below bottom row, practically right on the beach. If we wanted to go to the other side, we had to go around or cross the swamp. There were dirt roads on the side, and the swamp was pretty damp and dangerous at the time, it was deep, but they had a very small track that went through the middle that we could run through real quick, I remember running across there.
50. If they thought you weren't looking after your children, or weren't clean enough, they would take the kids to the dormitory. That's what Mum told me, and it's why the mothers were so

strict and clean; they were scared their kids were going to be taken. Mum was always like this, she made sure we were clean and fed, she always had the fear that we would be taken away like she was. She told me that. I remember as a kid she would say 'behave yourself, they will take you soon', things like that. Mum and the aunties would threaten us sometimes that we'd be taken away to Palm Island. I remember my Aunty used to say behave yourself or we'll put you on that log and push you there. It is funny to talk about it now, but as kids we were scared.

51. Outside of Yarrabah there were also camps around the boundary, at back beach and all around. It was still controlled there too. Some of those camps were called Reeves Creek, another one was Mourigan, Oombunghi was another one. The Choikee area for our family was called Wungu, that was Dad's family's area. Some still live out that way now. We have a song for that area. I used to walk from my camp out to those places to visit Dad's family when I was living on the mission. It would take us most of the day to get there, but we'd camp out there and come back the next day.
52. I remember if we had to go to Cairns we would need to go on a boat, but you'd still need permission to go there. You were only allowed to go shopping for a certain time, you had to be under that permit that whole time, and you had to be back on that boat and home by a certain time. There was only one boat. You would get off at the point and walk back to the mission, it was a long walk on those oyster shells. The black trackers would walk with us from around the point to and from the boat, and then years later they got tractors. In those days if we wanted to go shopping in Cairns, we met at the police station and they'd put us on the tractor and take you around the point to the boat, and then bring us back on the tractor.
53. On the mission we had to live off rations that you'd line up for every week, on a Friday, I think. Mum just knew when it was. We used to have to line up for them. I remember Mum and the old girls saying, 'it's rations day, we have to go get them'. It was horrible food. It wasn't meat it was offal, as well as rice, sago, treacle in a tin, molasses and sugar. I remember lining up, and we had to be well dressed for rations. If you weren't properly dressed you wouldn't get anything, and you'd have to go back to the mission, to our camp, empty handed. We were also only given one blanket per family per year on the Queen's birthday. It all just became normal practice. In those days, you never refused anything, you'd take what you got as it wasn't much.
54. We weren't meant to practice our ceremonies or rituals and we weren't allowed to go hunting and gathering; but we did it anyway, mostly at nighttime we'd sneak away. I remember Dad would go fishing or hunting at nighttime also after he finished work.
55. When I was at school, I remember the missionaries and others used to measure our heads. I remember just having to do it, it would just happen at the school, the old school. They would just come and do it when we were sitting there. This happened often before I was sent

to boarding school. We didn't know what it was for at the time, but we later heard it was for phrenology. Phrenology or craniology was a pseudoscience that involved the measurement of bumps on the skull to supposedly predict mental traits or intelligence.

56. When I was little, every morning the bell would ring, and we had to go to church. We also had to go in the evenings. The black trackers, the black police, some of who were our relatives, would be there watching to make sure we went. The boys and girls were separate. I remember we had a song, and they would go around, and we had to put offertory money into the bowls. You would hear the penny dropping and we'd sing that song. Mum always made sure we had money to put in that bowl because you had to, you didn't not put money into it.
57. I remember the older women, they really did the best that they could in horrible circumstances, they used to sing and dance, they loved being together.
58. You couldn't swear, you couldn't say anything wrong, you couldn't even call the Superintendent by their first names, otherwise you'd be put into a prison. The Missionaries were also only allowed to be called Mr or Mrs. I remember my Dad's brother-in-law, my Uncle, just one day called them by their first name, and that was a crime. They grabbed him and his kids and put him on the mission boat and took him away. He was an intelligent man. I remember he just called them by their first name. I remember going down to where Granny lived near the beach to say goodbye to them. They were sent to Palm Island.
59. The Prison was just one bedroom, just one room. I remember when I was little being put into that room, a lot of us were. It was frightening, it was dark, there was no light. How long you were kept in there depended on what you did. I didn't spend too long in there as I tried to be a good girl.
60. I also had a white godmother who I had to call Mumma Matey. She was the matron. I had a white godfather who I had to call Dadda. My godparents weren't my parents' choice, it was the missionaries' choice. This is what happened in Yarrabah.
61. Our school on Yarrabah was an old, dilapidated building, and the missionaries were our teachers. They used to read us bible things. It was nice when our aunties would come up to the school and help teach, instead of the missionaries. There was a lot of spanking from the missionaries. I remember we wrote in ink. They were so nasty the missionaries, they weren't nice people. I remember the boys used to fight with them, I remember one day one of the boys threw an ink bottle at one of them, and made this white fella go black. The boy got punished after that. You had to bend over, and they'd bash you on the back. That happened to me. It was very hard. You had to put your hand out often too, you'd get hit on the hand with a cane. They wouldn't take you to the hospital if it was bad. It was hard trying to get through that.

62. To have fun with your family and friends, you had to go out the back and play so the missionaries didn't see us. We played hopscotch in the dirt, marbles, skipping. But we had to keep that secret, everything, even swimming, eating oysters and coconuts near the beach, you couldn't let them see you doing that otherwise you'd get punished. It was pretty bad. I remember the school was beside a creek. The creek had all vines so that's what we made our skipping things out of.
63. We all went up to grade 7. When it was time for high school, they would send us out to high school in Cairns on the boat, the barge. There was quite a lot of racism in those days. I only took that trip to Cairns for one week, I remember it was so rough on that boat. After a week I came off the boat, and that's when I found out I had to go off to boarding school. I walked past the police station, and I was told I had to leave. I talk about that later in my submission.
64. Yarrabah had a girls, boys and babies dormitory. I lived in the camps, but sometimes Mum told me that if I got sick, I'd spend time in the dormitory or at the hospital which was next door. I remember one time I went there because most of the kids were sick, so Mum took us in there to the dormitory to be looked after. If you were sick you were sent from the camp to the dormitory or hospital until you got better, that's if you got better. A lot of kids in those days didn't make it then when they were sick.
65. I have vague memories of the dormitory. Mum would come and visit us while we were there being looked after because we were sick, and we had lots of aunties too that helped look after us. But Mum still had to get a permit to go out of the camp to the dormitory, and then another one to go back to the camp. Everything was controlled.
66. When I was at primary school I loved music. They asked, "would you like to learn the piano?". Two or four afternoons a week, the policeman took me from school, took me home, and then took me to the fence, and then the white lady that taught me piano, she would come to the fence to get me, take my hand and take me to my lessons, she was lovely and taught me well. Then after I had finished, she took me back to the fence and the black trackers would come and collect me to walk me home, that was to protect us more than anything.
67. I remember the day Mum's brother, Uncle Rupert, who had been sent to Palm Island, came looking for her. He came over on the tractor, I remember he was sitting on the back. I think someone told Mum that there was someone, maybe her brother, looking for her. He didn't know her name, just that she was his sister, when he arrived, he yelled out sister. I remember Mum gave it to him, she said you get out of here, you left me, you left us young ones. We got him to the side, and he told us what happened that night on the Palmer River. He told us lots of stories. He said, "I didn't leave you; they took me." He was about 10 years old when he was taken that day. Mum was only little when this happened, so she didn't remember, she thought he had abandoned them. She was the youngest and we don't know how many brothers and sisters she really had.

68. There was a cemetery at the mission. If you weren't christened or baptised, when you died you had to have your grave outside the cemetery. They weren't Christian enough to be buried in there.

Being removed from Yarrabah – Boarding school

69. When I was about 12, I remember coming back from Cairns where I'd been at high school for the week. I got off the boat and there was an old police station there. One of the police trackers came over to me and said, "you'll be going tomorrow, you better come home and see your mum." I started screaming and crying and carrying on, so I went home. Mum said, "you have to pack, you have to go tomorrow, that's what the Government wants." That was the worst day of my life. It felt horrendous, it was terrible. The next day I had to get on the boat and train, and I was sent away. I remember Mum saying to me, "stop crying Flo you're going to make a difference in this world." Being taken away at a young age put a big hole in my life. It was very hard for me, very hard.
70. I was told that we had to be educated so I was taken away under the Act and separated from my family. In those days you needed an exemption form if you wanted to leave and be free, but you were never actually free.
71. Even though we had to leave to get an education, we had no choice. Our parents had to sign our exemption form that said we were free from being Aboriginal people. The older people would do their thumbprint as most couldn't read or write. That exemption form, we had to show it when we got onto transport, when we went into shops. Wherever we went, we had to show it. I always missed my family. I always think, why me? I wouldn't trade the education, but I think about all the family time and connection I lost. Education has always been important to me, and for my children too.
72. In those days we were given ports to travel with when we were sent away from Yarrabah. We were given certain items that we had to put in those ports, the basics.
73. I was taken to Townsville. They had some other kids from Palm Island, Cherbourg, Woorabinda, and they sort of put us into different categories. I was put into a few foster homes. We stayed there until they worked out which schools we would go to. The wait was a few months. I was then sent to boarding school in Charters Towers. I was the only one from Yarrabah that was sent there. There was a lot of us from different places, from Alice Springs, Palm Island, Kowanyama. We were all part of the stolen generation. I was at boarding school for five years.
74. Once we were there we weren't allowed to go back home. I remember, for some school holidays, I went to Melbourne and was billeted with different families through the Harold Blair fund, but once the holidays finished we had to go back to school.

75. At boarding school, I met my best friend. We were called the terrible twins, two peas in a pod, inseparable. During holidays, my best friend and I always went back to the dormitory in Palm Island.
76. Boarding school was run by nuns. I remember it was strict, lots of guidelines and we had to go to church three times a day. We would also line up for meals. If you wanted to go into town to shop or look around you had to be escorted by the nuns. After the nuns left, they put on educated teachers. This change occurred during my time at the school.
77. I remember my best friend and I would try and run away. We'd hide, but we got caught each time and punished. The first time we tried we hid behind this laundry thing. We got hit, we got smacked and punished.
78. There was lots of punishment in those days. When I first arrived at boarding school, it was run by nuns and it was very strict. We were punished quite a bit if you did something wrong, silly things like when you didn't want to do sports. We'd get punished with the leather strap, and the cane. We had lots of bumps and bruises. More cane than anything, the leather strap was for something really bad. Running and hiding was the cane mostly.
79. The food was better than the mission. We got lumpy porridge, lots of stews, maybe some rice pudding. We would have to line up and they would give it to you, and then you'd have to go to the table with it and eat together. We also didn't have our own room. It was a big space, five or six beds in a room. We had to make our bed, the old iron beds. We tried to stay as clean as possible. You'll find that a lot of those old girls that were in the dormitories or boarding school, they still today wash their sheets every day. It was horrible. Before we went into the seniors' dormitory at boarding school, we stayed at the juniors' dormitory. In the juniors' dormitory there was one room with lots of beds and cupboards. The seniors' room was at the top, there were only two beds in each room up there. My best friend and I shared a room.
80. I found a letter when I was going through my family and personal histories material that my mum had written. She had beautiful writing. She wrote to the Chief Protector, saying that she believed Flo had done her six years in boarding school and it was about time she came home. Mum never got a response. You had to ask if you could leave, but he never wrote back to anyone, it was at his leisure.

My time in Brisbane

81. Boarding school finished when I was about 17, and then I was sent straight to Teachers' College in Brisbane in the early 1970s. I didn't have a choice, I went straight there.
82. I got a train from Townsville to Brisbane. I was escorted by a liaison officer at the time. When we arrived in Brisbane, we had to go straight to George Street to the Chief Protector. I was sitting there, and looked in the corner, and there I saw a brown port in the corner that had my best friend's name on it. She had gone home to Palm Island and I didn't think we'd

see each other again, but they sent her down here too. I was so excited, we were the terrible twins.

83. When we arrived in Brisbane whoever worked at the Chief Protector's office gave us a form and we had to go down to McDonald and East to get clothes for ourself, and you only got a certain amount. We lined up to get our clothes, they were wrapped up in brown paper. You had to wait, the black ones were the last to be served. If we needed clothes after that we'd have to then ask, but it wasn't guaranteed we'd get anymore. I remember I got a scholarship, ABSCHOL, and out of that I got \$15 per week. That was a lot in those days.
84. When I first arrived, the Chief Protector put us in hostels, those hostels were just for girls, 58 McDougall Street Milton was where I was. I'll never forget that address. I was the first Aboriginal from community to go to Teachers' College. I remember I still had to show my exemption form, it was the only identity we had. It was like a dog tag which I couldn't be without. I have mine. Annexed as **FSW-2** is a copy of what my exemption form looked like that I found in my families and personal histories file.
85. I remember if we wanted to go for walks in the city, you had stay within certain areas, you couldn't cross the boundary streets. The curfew at night when we had to be home was at 6pm, and if you were late, you could be arrested. It was pretty horrendous. When I first arrived in Brisbane I thought we'd be free and able to walk around and do normal things, but I soon realised that wasn't the case. We couldn't walk free around the city, we couldn't cross the boundary streets into King George Square, Spring Hill, West End, so you had to make sure you could get home without doing that, otherwise we'd get stuck by the boundary streets. I remember sneaking though there at times. I remember later in life being asked if we wanted to change the street names, but we have said leave it because it's part of our history.
86. The Teachers' College was at Kelvin Grove, so each day we walked from Milton to Kelvin Grove, unless I had some money, in which case I'd catch the train from Milton to Roma Street, and then walk from there to Kelvin Grove. Every Friday afternoon at about 4 or 4.30 we needed to collect our scholarship, pocket money from George Street. We'd walk up that street and wait, and we had to sign a form. Then we had to find our way back to the hostel our self by curfew. When I think about it now, it was pretty horrendous.
87. While I was at the Teachers' College in Brisbane I went back to Yarrabah to see Mum for the first time since I was made to leave at about 12 years old. I went back for holidays, for about a month or so. Mum told me that they heard I was coming over by boat. They were all there waiting for me: Mum, my uncles, aunties and cousins. It was a beautiful day to be back, I cried and screamed, they all did.
88. When I came down for College here in Brisbane there was also a lot of activism. I used to try and be in the marches with the Brisbane Blacks if I could. I just wanted to be part of it. We used to go to all the protests. I felt empowered after every march. I loved it. We were

protesting about what had happened to us, where we were made to live, what had happened to us, we were fighting for equality, for health, access to legal services and land rights. That would have been in the early 1970's.

89. On Turbot Street there was this place called Open Doors. We'd listen to the bands and go there quite a bit when we could. I always kept my exemption with me all the time. We had no other identification.
90. I didn't end up teaching. I finished the course but didn't teach. I then joined the public service.
91. Even in western society and being exempted from the mission, horrible things happened to you too. A lot of racism over the years, but I always thought I could try and make a difference with reconciliation.
92. Later in life I tried to get all our records, Mum's and mine. I went into the government office and asked for our records in around the 1990s. When we got there, we found all this paperwork. At that stage we didn't know it was documented, so we spent the afternoon crying. It felt horrendous. It shows my Mum and all her stuff that she went through with her brothers and sisters, and what we went through at the missions.

Why is truth-telling so important to me?

93. Although I am in my seventies, I am still involved in many things. Knowing how strong those beautiful men and women of the stolen generation were, their resilience, I want to be part of the change.
94. I think all the trauma and things they went through, they did that for us. They were, they are the people we acknowledge, our elders past and present. Every day, every year we commemorate them. People say it happened all those years ago, but they don't realise the intergenerational trauma means it still is ongoing. I was very angry, but over the years, as you think about it, I have realised that anger achieves nothing. It's how you treat people. I don't know if we'll ever combat racism, but we'll try. We experience it all the time, but we try and do reconciliation events.
95. I am a chair of the National Sorry Day for the stolen generation, and I run a lot of truth telling sessions. I want to share our history; it gives me a sense of relief and peace. I have also started an elders' group in Yarrabah, and lots of other places too, for example around Moreton, we do lots of work with the school. We meet every Tuesday and Wednesday for the Yarrabah elders' group. When I was younger and setting this up I used to go up often, sometimes for weeks on end.
96. For me, this Inquiry process is a healing process. We don't blame, and we can't change our history. Many horrible things happened, but it is very important that people know our history and understand what people went through, the horrendous things, and know the truth. It's part of healing for all of us.

97. Since the referendum, it's been bad. After that I couldn't even go out of the house because it was horrible what people were saying. Talking about this, that's part of healing for me, telling people what happened. I sometimes think truth-telling should have been before the referendum, then maybe we would have got a better result. Racism still happens today, happens all the time, no matter where you go.
98. In Bribie Island we are also doing NAIDOC by night this year. We are lighting up the bridge and we are also doing truth-telling. It is healing, doing all of these things, it creates a community. I am busy and involved in lots of activities, but that is my way of coping. This truth-telling is the icing on the cake.
99. I remember meeting with Michael Aird back in 2012 where we worked on a program together with the State Library. During that interview we discussed my life story and family. In that interview I referred to a Granny Pollie, but I would like to correct the record as I actually meant Granny Ada.
100. I received Brisbane NAIDOC Elder of the Year in 2023, as well as Moreton NAIDOC Elder of the year in 2021. This year I was a finalist for the National NAIDOC Elder of the Year. In 2015 I also received an OAM for my service to Indigenous communities. It felt empowering to receive all of these awards, and that recognition. Below is a **photo** of me receiving the OAM award.



This Submission & the Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry

101. The contents of this submission accurately set out the evidence that I am prepared to give to the Truth-telling and Healing inquiry (Inquiry) and are true and correct of the best of my knowledge and belief.
102. I make this submission on invitation from the members of the Inquiry to assist the Inquiry to perform its functions in accordance with the Terms of Reference dated May 2024 (Terms of Reference). I consent to this submission being held by the Inquiry and acknowledge that it may be utilised and published by the Inquiry in accordance with the Inquiry's practice guidelines or procedures, which may change from time to time.
103. To the extent that permission is required to publish photographs contained in this submission, I authorise the Inquiry to make inquiries to seek and to obtain the relevant permission. Where required permissions are not given, I authorise the Inquiry to make any pre-publication redactions to photographs contained in this submission.
104. I authorise the Inquiry to make (at its discretion) any pre-publication redactions to this submission which are considered necessary and appropriate, including in accordance with the Inquiry's obligations under applicable laws and its Terms of Reference.
105. I confirm that:
- I am not aware of any legal, cultural or other basis on which the information within this submission should not be shared with the Inquiry and/or published;
 - consent has been obtained from any living individuals named in this submission, for their names and the accompanying information to be shared in the manner in which it appears in this submission.
106. I acknowledge that at the conclusion of the Inquiry, this submission will be regarded as an Inquiry record, and handled in accordance with laws which apply at that time (which may see my submission transferred to the Queensland Government for archiving).

Signed by Florence Sylvia Watson

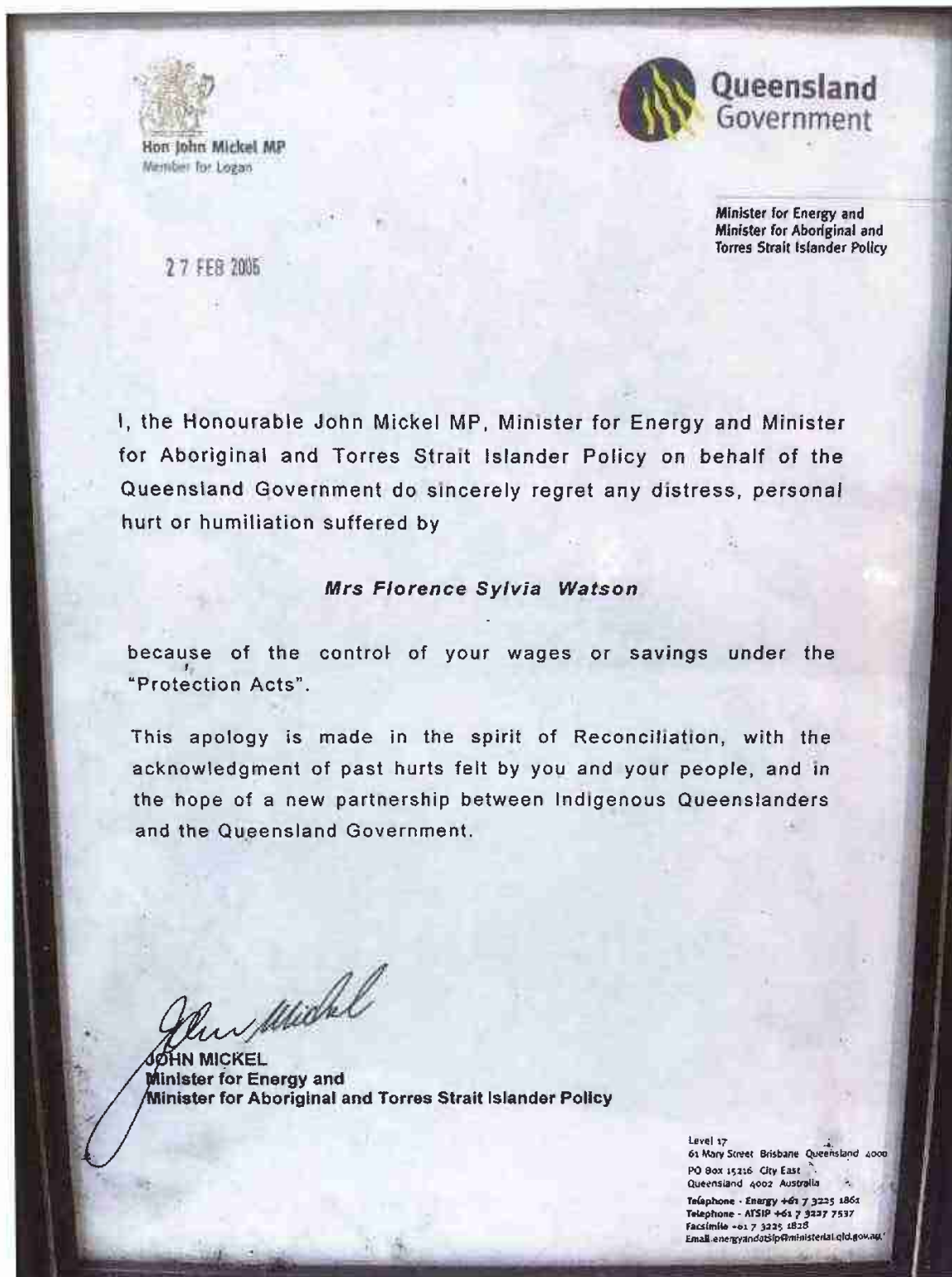
on 13th September 2024

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Signature

Annexure FSW-1

Copy of Apology Letter – Control of Wages



Annexure FSW – 2

A copy of what my Exemption Form looked like

EXEMPTION FORM FOR Florence Sylvia WATSON (Nee CHOIKEE)

In pursuant of the powers conferred by Section 11a of the Aborigines Act, 1934-1939
The Aboriginal Protection Board, being of the opinion that

of

by reason of his character and standard of intelligence and development, should be
exempted from the provision of the Aborigines Act, 1934-1939, does hereby
unconditionally declare that the said

shall cease to be an Aborigine for the purpose of the said Act

Signature of Bearer

The Seal of the Aborigines Protection Board was hereunto affixed on the
day of 19

In the presence
Chairman Member Secretary

THE ABORIGINALS PROTECTION AND
RESTRICTION OF THE SALE OF OPIUM ACTS
1897 - 1901

The Act makes provision, amongst other things, for the following:

1. Declaration of Districts within the State
2. Appointments of district protectors, Superintendents of Reserves and other officers
3. Removal of natives to Reserves
4. Control of Aborigines of Reserves, including the maintenance of discipline, punishment of offenders and suppression of injurious rites and ceremonies
5. Exclusion of unauthorised persons from such reserves
6. Restriction of sale of liquor or opium to Aborigines
7. Control of marriages of Aborigines with aliens
8. Control of employment of Aborigines and of removal from one district to another, by employers
9. Supervision of moneys and property of Aborigines
10. Issues of blankets and relief in necessitous cases
11. Care, Custody and Education of Aboriginal children
12. Maintenance of half-cast children and securing contribution from the fathers of such children, when possible